

Ransom Ship Crew Went Ashore In Cuba, Escorted

By HELEN DELICH BENTLEY
[Maritime Editor of The Sun]

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The Baltimore crew members who manned the ship African Pilot on her recent voyage carrying ransom medical supplies to Premier Fidel Castro were "escorted" everywhere they went ashore in Cuba.

If one got up to go to the men's room in a hotel bar, there was a gentle touch on his arm and an escort went along, according to Harold Screen, of Penhurst avenue, one of the two third mates on the trip.

Charles O'Reilly, of East Baltimore street, the other third mate—and one of the three men who shook hands with Castro—said it was obvious to him that the "escorts, all trained in the English language as well as in Russian," were trying to "brainwash us on the wonders of the present Cuban way of life."

For this reason, five of the ship's officers who met for an interview upon their return to Baltimore, emphasized the importance of using only American flag ships manned by responsible American seamen to transport the remainder of the \$53,000,000 cargo to Havana.

"We were surprised that there was no general search of the ship after we got there," Mate O'Reilly said. "In fact, they went overboard to try to be nice to us, even though we were only the crew on the ship."

Some Brought By Plane

The African Pilot carried the equivalent of \$10,500,000 in 1,500 tons of medicines and baby foods.

Five hundred thousand dollars worth of what was demanded by Castro before he released the 1,113 Bay of Pigs prisoners was flown in December 23 by Pan-American World Airways, whose planes also carried back the ill-fated invaders.

It was only after the African Pilot had arrived in Havana harbor after a 17½-hour voyage from Port Everglades, Fla., and Castro had a chance to look at the cargo aboard that he gave the sign to release the prisoners.

Jules Faber, third engineer, 1911 Wills avenue, gave the exact arrival times as 3:54 P.M. Sunday, December 23. At 5 P.M., the first planeload of prisoners was on its way to Homestead Air Force Base.

Most Of Crew From Baltimore

Most of the crew aboard the American-flag freighter was from Baltimore because the ship was here at the Bethlehem Key Highway Ship Repair Yard undergoing deactivation when she was pressed in service on this errand of mercy.

The men returned home Sunday and Monday after being paid off in Norfolk, where the ship returned to complete the deactivation process before being laid up permanently in the James River reserve fleet.

Engineer Faber related that Castro was on the dock when the Pilot made fast.

Cuban Longshoremen Respond

He told his longshoremen that it had taken the Americans three days to load the cargo, and he hoped they could do better than that in discharging it. He urged them to try to complete it in 24 hours, Faber said.

"Instead they did it in seven teen hours," the engineer added.

"Of course, it was a different story because all the cargo was there. One of the big delays in Florida was assembling the goods. It took three days or more to get it all together."

Worked Like Football Team

"They worked like a national football team in Cuba. They had fresh gangs to throw in constantly until all the cargo was off. They used double gangs in hatches and a mobile crane at one hatch."

There were more than 300 men used for the job.

"All the other ships in port were idle, which would indicate that all of the longshoremen had been transferred to the African Pilot."

There were six modern Russian ships in Havana it was said, including the passenger ship that took a number of Russians back.

Other Ships In Havana

In addition, there were one Norwegian, one Swedish, one Panamanian, two Greek, one Lebanese, and one East German, according to William Spearman, of 600 Martin boulevard and the third assistant engineer.

The crew members expressed particular surprise at seeing the Panamanian flag Tampico (not listed in Lloyd's Weekly Index) in the Havana, because Panama had issued such a flat ban against any of its ships going to Cuba.

They also noticed that the crews aboard the Russian ships were busy painting in rowboats at night, working around the clock. The Russian ships were without booms because derricks on the decks handled all of the cargoes.

Castro Helped Radio Officer

Noble Fox, of 3314 Greenmead road, who was the radio operator on the African Pilot, said it was the first time in his many years at sea that he was able to keep his radio open in port.

International regulations forbid this, he said, but Castro said there would be no problem if the skipper wanted to keep the radio open for direct contact to and from the United States.

It was open 80 per cent of the time in Havana, Mr. Fox said.

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